

## The Comic Note

An Address delivered to the O.P. Club by Mrs. Craigie

I do not think many could have wondered about the general significance of the term "Comic Note." "A comic note—a tragic note"—we find both terms constantly employed in the criticisms of dramatic performances and in the reviews of fiction and verse.

So much then for its literary employment, but I will try to illustrate it still further by an anecdote I heard this morning about perhaps the most eminent surgeon in England.

He objected to a certain candidate for a post under him on the following score:—

"He is an affected ass," said he, "when he takes up the forceps, he curls his little finger!"

Now that assistant, in fact, struck the comic note. It was a false movement, and an inappropriate one, and, in rejecting his services the great surgeon was acting on a sound instinct.

Thus, a comic note is not infrequently struck in some of our most serious productions, and we have all heard ripples of ill-suppressed laughter or giggling run through an entire audience during some scene of intentional pathos.

Now, I believe I have traced this tittering to the want of dignity in many impersonations. And by dignity I do not mean pomposity, which is of course grotesque, and I do not mean what is called "a presence," and I do not mean "the grand manner." I shall make myself clearer by saying that many children possess it, if they have not been over-trained, and all animals, which have not been domesticated, possess it. I do not profess to have studied the wild beast at close quarters in his home life, but I always make a point of observing the caged beasts of every great city, and the difference between the dignity of these captives, even in imprisonment, and the dreadful humiliation of animals trained for the circus and music hall is, to me, not only marked but extremely painful. A caged lion is superb; a tame lion beating a drum or rolling an empty barrel round the stage is a degrading spectacle, in fact, undignified. And in the same way I feel it undignified when a human being of good intelligence, appearance, and gifts, is brought to think, by a false system of art, that he must play down—against his convictions—to a large, mixed crowd; this is an insult to the large mixed crowd, and this is why they titter.

It may seem, at first, a paradox to you if I say that many so-called low comedians possess this dignity which I want you to consider, and, although the house is often convulsed with laughter at their absurdities, it is legitimate laughter—it is not a guffaw. A very conspicuous example of this quality is in Dan Leno, who, because of his extraordinary naturalness, never seems to degrade humanity. I often think that but for his disguises, which are studiously preposterous, he would more often make us weep than shout. Of course, this association of dignity with humour goes back to the original idea of the Clown, or Pierrot. Pierrot is always terribly in earnest: he suffers; he is made a fool of; he brings many of his troubles upon himself; he is a type of heaven-born imbecile, and it is his dress and artificially whitened face alone which give us the charter to take his difficulties as a joke.

When we come to the impersonations in so-called tragedy and high comedy and serious drama—when the make-up is intended to be impressive, and the dresses are most elaborately designed with an eye to all that is picturesque and portentous, either the language put into the player's mouth or the player's own demeanour are so

deficient in right feeling, that while we restrain the outward expression of our amusement, we move uneasily and wonder whether the age is become flippant, or we ourselves are out of touch with these enormous emotions. Then, just as this doubt enters our heads, the comic note is struck unexpectedly and absurdly. We don't always call it comic—we call it false: the author is attacked—the actor, if he is not popular, is very much blamed. I think it wrong to blame anyone. All the modern traditions of the English stage are against the realisation of life as a very natural affair. If you give an emotional part to any intelligent actor or actress, they begin to think out the most elaborate business: they invent most ingenious tricks in the way of expression, gesture, and attitude. They want ten lines where as many words would be, perhaps, too much, and it is hard to convince the average stage-manager that the greatest and most terrible moments in experience are essentially untheatrical.

Frederick the Great was ardently fond of the drama, and, while he had the keenest appreciation for satire, he liked to lose himself, or be reminded of his own experiences, in watching what we should call a sensational play. "But," he writes, in one of his private letters, "the moment any actor over-acts and allows his art to stifle naturalness, I become chilled to the bone, I lose all interest, and I am no longer moved by the most pathetic situation." Now Frederick had lived all his life in an atmosphere of highly-charged emotions; no one will deny that his knowledge of the human heart under all conditions, strains, reverses, and passions, must have been altogether supreme. Yet he insists on simplicity—quietude even. A critic might reply that an ordinary patron of the drama has not the vast experience of Frederick the Great, and therefore he prefers exaggeration; he cannot be reached unless the performer indulges in really extravagant gestures and rhetoric. Here I would venture to disagree with such a critic. I grant that we have not all great experience, but we all have certain instincts for what is comic. We find this sense of the ridiculous very strong in many children, who can have no experience of the great passions which agitate mankind, and I have often observed them stifling their laughter during the efforts of some popular tragic actor or actress in a very strong third act. In other words, they detect, in their innocence, the burlesque of the human soul.

I am not pleading now for what is called realism, because the word realism has become almost exclusively associated with everything that is squalid. To call any work of art realistic is another expression for dismissing it as repulsive and ignominious. People are afraid of studies of so-called humble life or poor life because they might be disagreeable. I quarrel with this entirely, and I deny that poor surroundings detract from the dignity—I am using the word pretty often—of the individual. The things that are undignified are matters of the soul, they are not matters of the environment, and this is why gorgeous mountings, dresses, slow music, and the really splendid effects of the scene-painter's art, as we see them nowadays, only serve to bring out the inadequacy of many performances which are intended to be heroic. And, before I go any further, I hope you will all understand that I am attacking current ideas with regard to acting, I am not attacking individuals. English actors and actresses of the first rank compare with the actors and actresses of any other nation, but they have to contend against traditions which do not exist in any other country. They are the slaves of some secret body of conventions

which they dislike as much as I dislike them, and most of you dislike them, nevertheless, they regard them as unalterable. It is not too much to say that some of our most distinguished artists have zealously forced themselves to appear in plays which they are far too intelligent to think plausible, and to depend upon tricks in the creation of their own roles, which they are too well-informed to imagine could be acceptable to reasonable beings.

I have often questioned friends of mine—clergy, soldiers, members of the legal and other professions, who see, of course, much more of the effects of actual emotion than any one individual in an ordinary career can ever hope to see—about what are called “big situations,” and I assure you, that they all subscribe to the criticism of Frederick the Great, and I could give you some extraordinary overwhelming evidence to prove the quietness of the human being under the most terrible and tragic strains—and this is without reference to class or education or temperament.

I want to dwell particularly upon this last point of class, education and temperament, because we all know that the manners of those who are too exalted for correction, in common with those who are too humble to be trained, are remarkable for the want of self-discipline. An eminent statesman once remarked in a former century that certain exhibitions of feeling were possible only to empresses and pauper fish-hags. But, in the many intervening classes between these two extremes, we all know that certain kinds of education make for self-restraint, and other kinds make for an untrammelled display of feeling and thought which it is the habit to call vulgar. I can but speak from my own observation, and I have noticed sublime examples of self-command and dignity among the obscure and the uneducated, whereas the most highly educated can be violent in their tempers, gross in their language, and undisciplined in all their actions. These things are a matter of constitution—what I might call fibre. Beyond doubt certain temperaments have less self-control than others, and indulge in outward signs of emotion which are acknowledged to be effective, and possibly necessary, upon the stage. Still, this much is certain—and there is no exception to the rule—in moments of acute feeling, no one is in the very smallest degree, in spite of any peculiarity of dress or appearance or circumstances, comic. There is a terrible simplicity in any shock which is strong enough to overpower our self-consciousness. But it must overpower the self-consciousness, and that is exactly where these elaborate studies of the stage fail. We are not carried away; we notice the cleverness when we ought to have lost ourselves in the emotion. If people are really moved, whether in themselves as sufferers or as onlookers, they are entirely unconscious of what they are saying or doing.

But it might be objected by playwrights that a drama about well-behaved, wholly sane, reserved and fastidious natures would be no drama at all. I confess very little would be done; there would only be very long thinking parts. We should see the revival of the soliloquy in an aggravated form. We should soon have no dialogue at all. Well, I am not so sure, in many cases, that would not be a gain. It would rid us of this awful fear which haunts the composer of problems that his words would not “carry.” It must always be remembered in writing for the stage that a great deal must be allowed for the manner and expression of the actor. Three words written on a sheet of paper may signify little, but spoken in the right way by the right person they may convey a whole world.

This is the great reason why I think it is a mistake to allow managers to read the MS. of a play. A play is written to be acted. It is written for the voice; it is written for any amount of right by-play, and it is not meant at all for the reader in the arm-chair. I have seen some MSS. prepared for managers, and the stage directions were tedious to a degree that I should have thought inconceivable had I not read them with my own eyes.

Apparently the parts are written on the hypothesis that the players are mere marionettes. On the other hand, I must say, in defence of the author, that there is a kind of laziness now on the part of our actors. They are afraid to trust themselves for a second without a sentence. All English players dread a pause. Personally, I do not care how long a speech is so long as it seems to come spontaneously from the speaker. It is quite right to give certain characters long speeches because in real life we meet people from time to time who have a real gift for describing their feelings and thoughts at every turn. If one can think of such a person and make him or her into a one-man or one-woman part, one may be congratulated.

There is nothing to be said against rhetoric on principle. We have all met born rhetoricians, just as there are born sentimentalists, but the best rhetoric ever written loses its point unless it is plentifully punctuated by pauses. Often a speech which is not in itself outrageous is made to seem so because the actor hurries through it as though he were speaking faster than he thought, and then we get what I may call again the comic note. Each utterance should seem to be the result of some experience; it should be connected with some earlier line of a scene in the play, or it should itself be leading up to some further development: the whole essence, in fact, of composition turns upon this. Wagner, in his operas, brought it out clearly as a system of motives. The actor, therefore, should convey the effect of someone who knows what he is talking about.

My plea is for naturalness, and any study of an emotional or of a philosophical rôle ought to be taken from life and not—as is now the case—from our little catalogue of tricks. It is the trickery which provokes indifference. Say, someone comes on looking very much like—well—an ordinary lover—I will not take an abnormal type. But, I ask you, does the leading juvenile behave like a lover or speak like one? The author may give him the most touching and charming things to say, but for some reason we find ourselves wondering why we are so singularly uninterested in the failure or success of the young man's suit. I remember taking a French friend with me to see a highly successful farcical comedy. He said, at the end, “I know now what the British expression ‘love-making’ means. It is something like a quadrille for two. The couple exchange seats, join hands at intervals, cross at intervals, and talk at the top of their voices the whole time.” I then took him to a work of a less frivolous character, but he pretended to discover the same characteristics pitched in a more solemn key, and, to him, the gravity of the superior lovers was even funnier than the irresponsibility of the lighter pair.

Now, as an author, my sympathies are naturally with my own profession. I am fully alive to the difficulties of the playwright. If he decides to be serious, he is expected to be more serious than life itself. He has to conceal his humour, that decent gaiety which underlies existence always. And I maintain that if you do not give that decent gaiety in the dialogue or the demeanour of the players, you will get a scornful gaiety in the audience. The common sense of humanity—perhaps I should say the common wisdom of the pit—will assert itself.

A great change has been coming over the public in its attitude toward humour, toward sentiment, and toward all abstract ideas. In that striking work, “The Flood Tide,” which was, to me, one of the most remarkable signs of the times, Mr. Cecil Raleigh hit off with admirable daring the precise feeling which now exists with regard to the old traditions of moral and other conduct on the stage. I say other conduct deliberately, because there are so many shades of opinion on the subject of conduct which was formerly described as immoral—again, I must remind you that I am speaking

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of stage morals. In Mr. Raleigh's play no one behaved particularly well, some behaved badly, most were shameless, and all were frank. As a result, the audience knew where they were. The old sham stuff was being discarded and laughed at, and they were asked to join in the general relief.

In a recent production, of the two lines which bring down the house, one could not have been said on the English stage at all two years ago, and the other would have been permitted to the heroine only if she had been an adventuress. It will be interesting to watch further developments on this line of the least resistance. I think it would be a pity if we became, as a nation, flippant. It does not suit us, because it is only an outward flippancy. It is not in the race to take things, which we have been taught to regard as sacred, lightly, but the evident rebellion against utterly false conventions of which I have already spoken, is a sign of great health and vigour in the present generation. It will no longer stand nonsense; and I have not seen a genuine success in any department of art which has not had a great deal to recommend it on one score or another—either the spectacle, or the stage management, or the ability of the company, or the merit of the author's work has commanded support.

Mr. Tree's last production, "The Darling of the Gods," is a triumph of the scene-painter's and the stage manager's art, and the melodrama—to use a colloquial expression—gets along! Mr. Belasco has thought out a very peculiar art of his own, for which I anticipate some possibly great improvements. It will show you how unselfish I am in the matter when I add that I think the author will not figure to any large extent in the scheme. Mr. Belasco has mastered the secret of giving vitality—I do not mean atmosphere, I mean *vitality*—to a stage picture. That is to say, his scenes are alive, and they are so alive that the greatest vivacity is demanded from the actor who appears in them, in order to compete with the natural forces as understood by the eminent American manager. The vivacity of the sky, for instance, is almost unparalleled, and light no sooner goes out in one corner than it peeps out in another. The very earth opens and shuts and there is apparently not an inch of canvas in his theatre which does not "palpitate," as the reviewers say, "with actuality!" But it is all so admirably carried out and so pleasing to the eye that, quite honestly, one wishes as little said as possible. An author who wished to keep pace with ingenuity of this kind must condense his meaning and must be simple, because it is not a dumb show, and it is not pantomime. I think Mr. Belasco is on the right track in the simplification of his subject matter. I should like to see his method applied to a piece dealing with modern life and familiar scenes. His presentment of "Zaza" followed the French original closely, and it cannot be regarded as an English or American production at all.

I have the most sincere admiration for the work of our chief dramatic authors, but is there one of whom we can say, as the greatest French critic of the last century said of Béranger—that he expressed the soul of France as a race and as a nation? His good sense as a man kept him from insincerity as a poet. We all know the dangers of the poetical temperament in the direction of sentimentality. Have we a serious writer who expresses, in dramatic form, the soul and the life of the English people? Yet how can that soul be expressed while managers persist in the view that the public—and that means the English people—are densely stupid, vulgar, and unimaginative. The view is foolish, and its foolishness is proved by the fact that, in America and in England, clap-trap is no longer

tolerated by those who pay for their seats. When I see a full house applauding balderdash, I wonder how many of the enraptured have bought their tickets with hard-earned money. So far our strictly national theatrical art is found in Gaiety comedy and Drury Lane melodrama—these things are racy, thoroughly English and representative. There is nothing in the least resembling them elsewhere. The dialogue in Drury Lane melodrama is life-like—there may be violence in the situations, but the talk is at least human speech as we often hear it. As for Gaiety comedy and comedy at Daly's, I am never weary of praising them, and, as a national entertainment of a light class they stand on the highest plane in the world. There is nothing comparable to these productions in New York, Berlin, Paris, Munich, St. Petersburg, or in the East, and the reason is because it has not yet been sterilized, cramped, and ruined by traditions. It is a growing art. It is now at a very high point of prosperity, and it may begin to decline under the stress of a change in the popular mind, changes which occur in every department with almost mathematical precision. But when we turn to the drama proper, we find writers and players alike bound down by the fantastic notions of what will or what will not carry across the footlights.

I maintain that sincerity will carry anywhere, and that the curled little finger must inevitably fail. If I wished to condense my view of the present situation in England of theatrical affairs, I should say, with the eminent surgeon I have quoted, that all the little fingers were curled. The conventions have grown into affectations, and, until they are thrown aside, we shall have titterings in the auditorium and bitter complaints among authors, and bitterer scenes among that lonesome and mysterious race known as "the backers."

Traditions, I admit, are useful, and they ought to be respected, but the two points in regarding any tradition of the stage are these:—In the first place, how shall it be understood, and, in the second place, how far shall it be maintained? Many traditions which suited the popular education twenty, or ten, or even five years ago, are really out of the question to-day. We may describe popular opinion as being in a transition stage on most subjects, and experiments must be tried. I do not recommend experiments in the way of dolorous and ignoble studies of humanity, but I do wish to urge experiments in the direction of greater naturalness in the written dialogue, and greater simplicity in the actor's business. There are two ways of being simple: one can be true to life or true to art. Sometimes it is possible to be true to both, and then we get the triumph of an actor or of an author, but such triumphs occur but seldom in the course of a whole century. We will not soar toward such ambitions. But I am speaking now of the good, workable, straightforward play about people as they are, or, if we are inclined to romance, people as they would wish to be if all things were equal. These can, at least, be true to life. Let us give Art a rest for a little. I think Art can take care of herself. I have always thought so. She never came to anyone for the asking, and in all her ways she is as capricious as Fortune. In this attention to life and the observation of humanity as opposed to the study of defunct canons of stage craft and obsolete sham heroics, I see all the hope for the British drama.

My entreaty, then, is not to write plays in imitation of other plays, and not to compare plays with other plays, but to test each separate play and every performance by the truths of life and experience.







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